



Souls

A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society

ISSN: 1099-9949 (Print) 1548-3843 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usou20>

Black Death, Mourning and The Terror of Black Reproduction: Aborting the Black Muslim Self, Becoming the Assimilated Subject

Jan-Therese Mendes

To cite this article: Jan-Therese Mendes (2020) Black Death, Mourning and The Terror of Black Reproduction: Aborting the Black Muslim Self, Becoming the Assimilated Subject, *Souls*, 22:1, 56-70, DOI: [10.1080/10999949.2020.1804803](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2020.1804803)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2020.1804803>



Published online: 08 Feb 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 14



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Black Death, Mourning and The Terror of Black Reproduction: Aborting the Black Muslim Self, Becoming the Assimilated Subject

Jan-Therese Mendes

Engaging with the contingencies of white national belongings and recognizable human life within the welfare states of Canada and Sweden this article questions whether Black Muslim women have access to grievable existence. Theorizing through the dismissal of Black death and the dread of Black women’s reproductive capacities, this article considers how the Black Muslim woman who dissolves her Blackness and aborts the once-threatening parts of the self can conditionally enter into mournable life, as the assimilated suicidal subject.

Keywords: assimilation, black reproduction, black Muslim women, Canada, death, mourning, Sweden

Introduction: When Does Black Life Become Grievable?

where black is naturally malignant and therefore worthy of violation; where black is violated because black is naturally violent... where black is naturally less-than-human and starving to death and violated... where black is same and always and dead and dying¹

How is Black existence — from the point of gestation — rendered as an inherent instrument of violence and readily instrumentalized by violence, within projects of white nation-making? Do the injuries that are visited upon the specifically Black female body register as a hurt that should be made to cease? Does her death inspire an empathic horror or trigger the pangs of grief? In Christina Sharpe’s profound text, *In The Wake*, she intimately engages with the contingencies of Black life when lived in relation to death in slavery’s “wake.” Sharpe variably describes Black life as “lived in, as, under, and despite Black death” and “lived near death, as deathliness.”² She thus asks: “[W]ho in fact is in possession of a life that can be

saved, because it is clear that in at least one direction Black lives are being destroyed?"³ Invoking Sharpe to draw a mortal line between the fear of Blackness and the lack of value for Black life I question the "grievability"⁴ of life when death is at once expected, unremarkable and ultimately, dismissible. More precisely I ponder: How can mournability appear as a possibility when the Black subject persists in a state of inconsequential mortality? Elsewhere I have sought to examine the ways Muslim women (often of Middle Eastern ancestry) might garner entrance into mournable humanity and national belonging through a redemptive death. What I have argued is that the death of the un-veiled, "honor killed" woman (necessarily murdered by the misogynistic Muslim Father or family) witnesses her refusal of Islam and acculturation into Canadian or Swedish whiteness. The spectacle of her maimed body, in turn, incites a public performance of white grief that confirms the lethal hazard of unassimilated Muslims. As a corpse she can be mourned in a way that serves the ends of white nation-making.⁵ I now ponder whether investments in assimilation and mourning are similarly available to the Black body and Black Muslim women in particular.

Not unlike an Islamic threat, fearsome Blackness is invoked as a necessary point of contrast to the whiteness that comparatively shapes Canadian and Swedish national imaginaries. That is, a frightfully disparate and violently inclined Blackness offers a form of terror that can affirm the vulnerability of a white citizenry and justify the reinforcing of borders against this dark danger.⁶ Black subjects appear as imperative national enemies. If such is the fear of Blackness it is not evident that public grief would follow the extinguished Black life. Black Muslim women would not be exempt from this terror of Blackness. Furthermore, an extended legacy of Black feminist thought makes it clear that Black womanhood is particularly figured through gendered forms of fear and disposability that center on Black women's reproductive capacities.⁷ Black Muslim women would not be spared from this dread of Black women's insides. In the effort to discern whether mournable life and assimilatory futures are indeed open to Black Muslim women we are then first indebted to the Black feminist reasoning that locates the global devaluation of the Black female body in "the wake" of African enslavement and colonization. The historical speculation on Black non-humanity, exploitability, and destructibility enables us to speculate on Black death. I call upon Sharpe and her contemporaries throughout this article in acknowledgment that chattel pasts continue to linger in the responses to the gestation of Black life within Canada and Sweden's liberal presents. In the nightmares of either white nation appears the danger of the multiplying Black enemy. Inspired by the intellectual contributions of Black feminist scholars from the last two decades this article engages with empirical examples that, reveal the racist-sexist trepidations that surround Black women's reproduction; decide Black propensity for acculturation; and inform the grievability of Black Muslim women.

Building upon the analytical heritage of Black feminist thought, I suggest that Black Muslim women's mournability is conditioned by the same racist discourses

that render the Black womb as a site of death—as a death machine. Nonetheless, Black Muslim women might have access to forms of social resuscitation into the mores of white national belongings and thus mourning that are barred to their non-Muslim sisters. What I argue is that the redemptive possibilities available to Black Muslim women continue to invoke Black death while relying heavily upon tropes of the “oppressed” Muslim woman. It is by diluting or figuratively killing their Blackness that women can excise the fearsome self. As such, she can attempt to enter into the mournability that neo-imperial and Orientalist logics contingently extend to the assimilating Muslim woman. Black Muslim women’s lives can begin to be recognized as grievable once they perform the assimilatory act of self-slaughter. Women’s threatening correlation with Black reproduction is then nullified since this symbolic suicide both sterilizes the Black womb and aborts the once-Black self. However, the Muslim identity of Black women must also be smothered in accordance with the dictates of assimilation which demand her refusal of Islam. Promised to accompany the destruction of her Blackness and Muslimness is a re-birth into the body of Canadian or Swedish whiteness, which is always and ever grievable.

The Danger of the Black Womb

What draws seemingly disparate Canada and Sweden into dialogue are the similar racial contradictions that appear within their national ideals. Both nations dominantly invest in the visage of an anti-racist, liberal, and distinctly tolerant politic and yet ideologically maintain that the normative national subject is indisputably white.⁸ The white nation/citizen can be sanctified as anti-racist although they cringe away from the very Black and brown bodies they claim to accept. Further, the progressive goodness of either nation is reified as timeless even as, histories of slave-trading are dismissed; practices of (settler-)colonialism persists; and the white supremacist investments used to secure national borders are concealed or legitimized.⁹ As two Northern nations structured on extensive systems of social welfare, Sweden and Canada also marry in the sense that white national prosperity can be undone by Blackness. The Black body is at once a site “emptied” of life¹⁰ and contains the terrifying ability to empty the spaces of the living through the gluttonous or criminal depletion of governmental resources.¹¹ When it comes to Black women, however, that which torments is more specifically located in the insides of the body. Hereby the procreation of Blackness prophesies peril to the dominant social order and the pilfering of social welfare through Black women’s ungovernable fertility. A germinating treachery. The terror of the Black uterus and loathing of the fetus. What can be said of the value given to Black life in either country when reproduction foreshadows a danger conceived, nurtured, and delivered from Black women’s most intimate bodily parts?

A Note on Canada

The depravity and impending national injury situated in the womb of the Black woman is well illustrated through the immigration case *Baker v. Canada*, which was seen in the Supreme Court in the late 1990s. I treat this case as one of my Black feminist inheritances. Richly analyzed by my intellectual forbearers this case is oft-cited to elucidate how the criminalization of Black women's fertility is deployed as a measure to secure the white nation.¹² Although it does not center on Black Muslim women, I turn to *Baker v. Canada* because it remains a palpable signifier for the fear of Black women's reproduction in Canada. The details of the case are as follows. Mavis Baker was an undocumented domestic worker from Jamaica and mother of eight. Suffering from postpartum depression following the birth of her youngest child, Baker was no longer able to work.¹³ Ordered deported from Canada after eleven years in the country, her application to have her deportation deferred, under what are called "humanitarian and compassionate" grounds (H&C), was denied. Quite tellingly, the notes of the deciding immigration officer observe that Baker is a "paranoid schizophrenic"; dependent on welfare; has four children born within Canada (!) and just as many in Jamaica (!); and, will be "a tremendous strain on our social welfare systems." The remarks bitterly finish with, "Canada can no longer afford this type of generosity."¹⁴ Here is the excessively fertile, migrant, Black female body which does not produce valuable Canadian and thus human lives but, state liabilities. Greedy spawn of a scheming alien mother.¹⁵ H&C considerations are refused because Baker is already outside of considerations of humanity or the affect of compassion. I would argue that this case reflects a continuation of "the wake." The once profitable and cultivated "breeder woman ... of slavery" who was coerced to multiply¹⁶ is remade as a degenerate body. In slavery's aftermath, she can be accused of illicitly procreating they who can yield no gain. Nevermore will anything of value emerge from this body in the wake of captivity. Black women's gall to reproduce in itself becomes a dangerous act. Birthing Blackness is an act of reckless violence. Irresponsible. Irrational. Undisciplined. Pregnancy emerges as a criminal urge that requires the forces of governmentality to stop the exploitative hemorrhaging of Canada's benign multicultural heart. Even from (the prospect of) inception Blackness is a hazard to the nation.

Particular to Baker's case is that she represents a deviant Blackness coming from outside the nation that remains as an "illegal" yet, demanding occupant. Within a white-dominant Canadian imaginary, Black migrant femaleness is — in the words of Jenny Burman — "[the] body that can hide, conceal, deceive — as it moves into and out of our national space."¹⁷ The transnationalism of Baker's undisciplined childbearing encompasses part of the threat as her border crossing means to unleash the spoiled fruit of her Jamaican womb. A vandalizing womb that delivers the vandal. The Black child is the annex of the burdensome mother. What comprises Baker's supposed psychosis is this unruly disposition to bring forth more foreign, unwanted bodies into Canadian space. Echoing Charmaine A. Nelson, the "black female body... [becomes] the site of pathological sexual

deviance” with multiplying capacities.¹⁸ All of which outrage the borders of the nation, its rightful citizenry, and the reasonable limits of Canadian humanitarianism.

How do Black Muslim women then appear within these discourses of dangerous reproduction in Canada? Cynthia Wright’s analysis of early 1990s anti-immigrant rhetoric offers a compelling case study on this topic since the public discourse at the time specifically lamented the presence of Somali refugees in Canada.¹⁹ Taking-up Daniel Stoffman’s inflammatory article in a 1995 issue of *Toronto Life* magazine Wright explains that, unwed or widowed Somali women were accused of continuously giving birth and thus by sheer mass, establishing themselves as a “permanent” fixture in white Canadian space.²⁰ The repeated pregnancies of women coming from Muslim-majority Somalia signifies their immorality or trickery. That is, more Black Muslim children are being born outside of wedlock or else, Somali women are “bogus single mothers on welfare” lying about their marital status.²¹ In this latter instance of deception, I read that women’s reproductive treachery is interwoven with the danger of the virile Somali man who is elusively out-of-sight yet ever ready and able to spawn more Black Muslim children. Offspring are sustained not through the economic means of the Black Muslim Father but through the patronage of the Canadian welfare state. The sexual potency of Somalis becomes a source of national peril as the white nation must take on the role of both reluctant Father and virtuous patriarch. Indignation then increases with the government’s speculation that the welfare money wrangled through the Black womb’s overabundance is used to fund Muslim men’s war-efforts.²² The menace of the refugee woman from Somalia also rests in her willingness to harbor Black Muslim men in the shelter that is her vagina. Dissolute, she can unleash the parasitic bounty of her over-reproducing uterus and through this progeny secure the welfare cheque for violent ends. Black Muslim refugees do not need saving from imminent death rather, their vulnerability is treated as a fraudulent stratagem.

A Note on Sweden

In Sweden, there appears a Black deathliness in reverse whereby the existence of the Black Muslim mother is extinguished before she can bring forth more Black Muslim life. Karin Elebro et. al’s 2007 investigation into maternal mortality amongst East African migrants to Sweden reveals that Somali migrant women make-up a significant number of unreported or misclassified maternal deaths.²³ The fact of death is being recorded yet the reason for death slips out of the archive. What is happening in this misclassification? What else is lost alongside the extinguished life? People of Somali descent represent one of the most despised groups within Sweden and are understood to epitomize the social dangers of the excessively multiplying African refugee.²⁴ Such contempt is discernible even in the conclusions Elebro et. al draw from their findings. One inference calls for greater attention to the “cultural and medical competence” of European health

professionals when “caring for non-European immigrant mothers.” Another proposes that Somali women’s higher maternal death rates might be indicative of being less “integrated into Swedish society” than their Eritrean and Ethiopia counterparts.²⁵ Although Sweden has one of the world’s lowest ratios of maternal mortality, the conjecture is that the nation does not have the institutional capacity to preserve “non-European immigrant [Muslim] mothers” from death. Unmanageable, unsupportable alien bodies; aborted at last from the perimeters of Sweden and Europe. In turn, the inability to swiftly or completely integrate into Swedish society becomes a mortal matter. Non-integration puts these Black (presumptively Muslim) migrants at risk of death. Non-integration renders these women, in part, at fault for their deaths. Engaging with Elebro et. al.’s primary findings, however, it is evident that what is erased along with women’s cause of death is more Black Muslim life. Put differently, it is in the pursuit of bringing forth Black Muslim life that these women enter into death. Another life was either lost (a double death) or managed to survive in the aftermath of the pregnancy. The lives of both the Black Muslim mother and Black would-be Muslim fetus are nullified in the unrecorded maternal death.

Somali migrants are also taken to be conveyors of some of the worst “savageries” of Islam (e.g., female circumcision, “child marriage”).²⁶ Presumptively, these scorned customs would align with the gendered sufferings rehearsed by Islamophobic imaginings. Yet, I ponder if Black Muslim women are derided alongside the derided practice—placing her beyond public feelings of commiseration. If women cause injury to the white subject/nation through the excesses of their wombs part of the outrage would be that they have brought pain upon those for whom it is not meant. What inspires horror would not be her suffering but the cultural wreckage her unasimilability promises to unleash. Hence, her incorrigible foreignness explains her openness to foreign injury. Such pain belongs to her. Accurately documenting the maternal deaths of those who, in life, endanger the vitality of Sweden would be a task that holds little value. What dies along with the Somali woman is she who was never meant to have a lasting place within the national body.

The Mournability of Black Muslim Women?

“Grief, then, for these deceased others might align some of us, for the first time, with the living”²⁷

Returning to Sharpe, we are called upon to consider slavery’s system of “partus sequitur ventrem” whereby the Black child is made to assume “the non/being of the mother.”²⁸ Explaining that this “inheritance of non/status” once converted Black wombs into “a factory producing blackness as abjection” Sharpe conveys that such techniques maintain an afterlife in today’s demonization of Black women and children and through governmental reveries of the terminated Black fetus.²⁹ From here we can briefly dwell upon Claudia Rankine’s estimations that the bad feeling of Black suffering is a feeling that does not stick within the white liberal imaginary. A

dying Blackness and the spectacle of the “black corpse” simply figure amongst the ordinarily grotesque.³⁰ The unremarkable cadaver. Considering Sharpe and Rankine together we can deduce that, if genocidal fantasies patrol the borders of the white welfare nation — seeking to expel the villain growing in the amniotic fluid of the non-human — the “inheritance of non/status” becomes a deathly birthright for the Black child. Black women’s wombs are thus not only factories of abjection but, I argue, death machines: reproducing those oriented toward social death and a negligible physical death. Despite these grim musings, the empirical examples I have pursued thus far do not necessarily reflect the orchestrated effort to bring about Black death. Rather, they reveal indifference to Black Muslim survival, an apathy toward Black Muslim suffering, and hostility toward the Black Muslim womb that reviles all that promises to come from this Black female body. We are then still left to ask: When do Black Muslim women’s lives become mournable? How does her death become something other than a “nonevent”?³¹

Nelson’s examination of the black female body in early twentieth-century Canadian art notes the legacies of European imperialism in a “visual culture” that depicts Black women as both sexually deviant and sexually accessible.³² Interestingly, Nelson explains that in painter Dorothy Steven’s work *High Yellow* (n.d.) we see the Black woman become reputable when dislocatable from a full blackness.³³ The subject of Steven’s portrait can be read as confining her otherwise deviant sexuality to the moralist realm of heteronormative wedlock. Moreover, the fairness of her skin visibly references proximity to whiteness.³⁴ This subject, Nelson writes, is “an embodiment of the desirable black body in the west that is historically never fully black.”³⁵ Engaging with Nelson, I ponder whether Muslim identity might socially function as this diluent for Blackness. Hereby Black Muslim women could reference a Muslimness that positions them as not “fully black” and thus not immediately dismissible to the regions of unretrievable humanity in the way of the “black corpse” or death machine. A Muslim self might then enable Black women to gain proximity to the white nation and enter into the forms of mournability made available to the demonstrably integrating Muslim woman. If to be recognized as an assimilating Muslim can assuage the danger of the fully Black subject we can interpret this dissolution as a kind of racial unveiling. Donning the appropriate signifiers for an integrable Muslim identity (i.e., personal narratives of resisting patriarchal repression) doubles as a disrobing of a dreaded Blackness. Black unassimilability and disposability would be replaced with an assimilable potential and the prospect of mournable life.

What is perplexing about this logic however, is that even as the Black self dilutes one’s Muslim identity is also meant to eventually endure a process of elimination. Within Islamophobic logics “the veiled Muslim woman” who enters into mournability must first perform witnessable acts of assimilation into Canadian or Swedish normative culture.³⁶ Such acts include removing the hijab and rejecting her Muslimness.³⁷ The refusal of the Muslim self is conceived to bring about her martyred death (i.e., “honor killing”) and sanction white national grief. Her national membership is affirmed postmortem. If women with a dissolving Blackness are to

seek a place within national belongings and thus, valued existence it follows that they must also demonstrate their integrative capacity. Ardently, she is to let both her veil³⁸ and her Muslim identity fall in tatters at the feet of the nation. Although Muslimness is what dissipates a full Blackness this very same agent must be relinquished to enter into the mournability reserved for the assimilated ex-Muslim subject. Both an unmournable Blackness and not-yet-mournable Muslimness are repulsed. What does the self become or, become re-born as in the aftermath of this shedding? It is through case studies of two Somali women taken from major national news sources and right-wing media that I seek to address such queries.

Dissipated Blackness and the End of the Muslim Self: Case Studies

In a 2018 article from CBC Radio (Canadian Broadcasting Company) headlined “Meet the Somali mom of 5 who just started doing stand-up”³⁹ we find the following snippets of dialogue:

Mayran Kalah knew she was funny at a young age. But growing up in Somalia, she saw that other girls were discouraged from expressing themselves.

When she arrived here at 16, she didn’t speak a word of English.

Kalah’s humour is rooted in her life story — like her career transition from goat herder to interpreter

“Over the years — because I was from [a] war-torn country I thought ‘I will not judge anybody’ ... because I will want you to do that for me.”

“I want to connect with people, make people laugh, put people at ease.”

Mayran Kalah’s narrative is fascinating for the ways it allows us to speculate on the metamorphosis of the integrating subject in Canada. Notably absent from this story is any explicit reference to Kalah’s Blackness or Muslimness rather, she is most readily identifiable as a once-Somali national, now refugee to Canada. Yet, there are ways that the residue of these unarticulated identities appear. We can locate leftovers of a dangerous Blackness in the violences from which she is described to have come (“I was from a war-torn country”) as African origins persist as a site of familiarly massacred Black life. Likewise the deathly excesses of the Black womb can be revealed in the titled reference to her large number of children (“Somali mom of 5”). Nonetheless, an alignment with the terror of Blackness is quickly lost through the signposts of her “rescue-ability” and capacity for “cultural integration.”⁴⁰

As a Muslim-majority country Kalah’s Somaliness renders her as presumptively (though, unspokenly) Muslim. In turn, we can readily conjure the must-be misogynistic Muslim Father/family and the suppressed autonomy of the liberalizing Muslim girl in the mention of her silenced humor (“growing up in Somalia ... girls were discouraged from expressing themselves”). Although brief this story allows us to imagine the brutalities from which Kalah has been saved. As a

Muslim, teenage, asylum seeker her early longings speak to a previous unfreedom and her subsequent assimilatory potential. In adulthood, she is neither the Muslim subject nor does the prominence of her Somali-refugee past seem to draw her (back) into the non-status/non-being of Blackness. Instead, Kalah is recast or reborn as the properly integrating subject. The testament to her appropriate re-making and commitment to the conditions of the rescue are therefore witnessed in: her work as an interpreter, the learning of English, and the desire to diminish a public's anxiety ("I want to ... make people laugh, put people at ease"). Here is the relinquishing of the savage trade (i.e., goat herding), the foreign tongue, and the threat of the alien Other as Kalah seeks to become like "us." Significantly, Kalah's plight can be readily recounted for a Canadian public audience. Each rehearsing of the dangers from which she has been saved plausibly renews her authenticity as a savable subject. Her trauma can be recycled through this repetition, as can her re-birth.

Paired with Kalah's narrative is a photo of her as a jean-clad young woman with her short hair blowing in the wind. An image evidently capturing her earlier years of asylum. And yet, we are also presented with more recent photos of Kalah in which she wears a headscarf. It is not clear whether this scarf is a hijab but, considering the terms of assimilation its presence allows us to ponder. Is this a lingering of the forsaken Muslim past? A faltering of appropriate national loyalties? What risk might its appearance pose to Kalah's mournability if it resurrects the treachery of the non-integrating Black Muslim woman? What I am asking is whether this emergence of the headscarf can be taken as a symbol of the assimilating subject's incomplete transformation. What would its unequivocal completion look like?

Mona Walter, in Sweden, perhaps offers one of the most explicit examples of what the irrevocable adaptation into the values of white nationhood can mean. Having come to Sweden as a teenage asylum seeker from Somalia, in adulthood Walter refuses aspects of her pre-Swedish self through her candid abhorrence of Islam and Somali Muslim migrants. Her rhetoric is readily taken-up by both right-leaning and mainstream media outlets as a testimony to the impending threat Islam and migration pose to Sweden, as reflected in various interviews or online editorials that span from 2015–2018. Revealing extracts include:

"I discovered Islam first in Sweden. In Somalia, you're just a Muslim, without knowing the Koran ... I didn't know what I was a part of" ... "So, when I found out, I was upset" ... It was in Sweden that Walters says she discovered Allah is a God who hates⁴¹

There is a choice. The Swedish system supports people so much ... We cannot just wonder why Somali criminals are what they are; we must ask ourselves: why are they not like us?⁴²

The creator [the Prophet Muhammad] of this ideology [Islam] was a criminal ... How can we open borders for such an ideology? As we do not know who is coming to us, we must be very careful, especially since we see what happened to Christians in Muslim countries⁴³

She wanted to show us Muslim areas around Gothenburg, but had to first dress as a Muslim. She believes if she were to show her face, she would be attacked ... "I would never get out of there alive," she said⁴⁴

People keep telling me, "How can you say such things, if you are an immigrant yourself" But I am not a danger for people living here. Many of the newcomers would cut off my head.⁴⁵

The attested nominal nature of Walter's Muslimness allows her to credibly and deliberately separate herself from Islam since she can deny having had an informed allegiance to the faith. Witnessing her capacity for Swedish integration even further Walter strikingly enacts a religious conversion in tandem with her cultural conversion—that is, by becoming Christian.⁴⁶ Unlike Kalah in Canada, any risk of Walter's backwards slide into the dangerous incompatibility of Muslim identity in Sweden is negated through her entrance into Christianity within what is at root a Christian country.⁴⁷

Although Black feminist thought continues to offer us some of the most lucid explanations for Black women's degradations, I am also beholden to the work of Black political theorists such as Achille Mbembe for how I conceptualize the affective complexities of Black Muslim life and death. Mbembe's poignant remarks on the destruction of the self through suicide are worth quoting here at length.⁴⁸ Mbembe writes, "To willingly relinquish one's existence by giving death to oneself is not necessary to make oneself disappear. Rather, it is to willingly abandon the risk of being touched by the Other and by the world." And further, "The killer kills himself [sic] while killing others ... [H]e disposes of himself, and disposes of some enemies as he does so ... discharg[ing] himself of what he once was and of the responsibilities that as a living being was once his to attend."⁴⁹ Drawing on Mbembe we can suggest that in relinquishing the existence of her Muslim identity Walter is not seeking an end to the self altogether. Rather, she removes the threat of being tainted by affiliation with this Otherness. Discharging of what she once was. Walter's continually verbalized repudiation of Islam and (Somali) Muslim migration performs the effort to dispose of the enemy along with the deadened parts of the self. Diverging slightly from Mbembe I would contend that the result of these disposals is not Walter's relief from the "responsibilities ... [of] a living being" but, quite the contrary. By "giving death" to the Muslim self Walter can, at last, enter into the realm of the living. In this way, her religious conversion enacts the death of the Muslim self as she is reborn as a legitimate Swedish subject.

Walter nonetheless finds ways to make her Muslimness linger even after this suicide. Although her rejection of Islam and conversion publicly confirms that she is indeed rescue-able, Walter continually renews her need for protection through the reiterated claim that Muslim migrants pose a threat to her life. "I would never get out of there alive." Because her life is threatened by the violence of the Muslim outsider it should be recognized as a life that must be protected from threat. Without access to the forms of mournability that weave the body of the "honor killed" Muslim woman into the fabric of the nation Walter replaces the murderous

Muslim Father with a murderously inclined local Muslim populace. “Many of the newcomers would cut off my head.” Walter borrows from the tropes of the “oppressed” Muslim woman to demonstrate her saveability—even as an ex-Muslim. Walter also plainly indicates her “likeness” to the normative white Swedish subject by presenting herself as vulnerable to the same dangers that plague the nation. Thus, reminding us: “I am not a danger for people living here.” Despite “dress[ing] like a Muslim” for Swedish media (which presumably implies having donned a hijab) we are never left to wonder whether such garb signifies Walter’s reentrance into Islam or reflects her waning national loyalties.

And what of Walter’s Blackness? The contempt and fear of Somalis she articulates anticipate the disposal of the Black enemy within the self. It is the emphasis placed on her once-Muslim status however that allows Walter to be more than the self-hating Black subject. A vulnerability to the dangers of Islam obscures what tethers her to an ungrievable Blackness through the familiarity and urgency of the assimilated Muslim women’s precarity. Even so, it is possible that her overt disdain of Somali Muslims reflects an effort to distance herself from the menaces of Blackness that might still threaten to take hold through her own African refugee past. In continually deriding Somalis in Sweden for their supposed propensity for violence and refusal to integrate⁵⁰ Walter can erect silos between those still committed to the backwardness of a Black Muslim elsewhere, and herself. Such are the barbarities from which she comes; was once ignorantly imprisoned by; but is no longer. In this sense, the unassimilability of Somalis must be made to continue so that it remains demonstrably clear what Walter is not.

I further ponder if there are certain promises that Walter is making through her contempt. To be precise, I question if Walter’s ridiculing leverages the assurance that she will not reproduce the dead. Because she has already rhetorically sterilized her Black Muslim womb (terminating its deathly potential through her loathing of the unassimilated) we can be satisfied that she will not give birth to more Black Muslimness. Walter at once terminates the perilous excesses of the Black Muslim womb and aborts the once-African refugee self through the covenant of her derision. The verbal bludgeoning of the threat that she cannot be and will not reproduce demonstrates Walter’s loyalty to the white Swedish family, dispelling their unease by bringing the threatening parts of the self to slaughter. To be reborn as a Swede through this coupled elimination means to have castoff the Black Muslim husk of an “emptied” life.⁵¹ Nothing coming from her integrated body can be anything other than Swedish. As an ex-Muslim and ex-African refugee Walter saves herself from death by entering into the life of the white nation.

The Haunting of the Dead

Contemplating the pleasures of “cross-cultural dressing” Mary Ann Doane suggests that something is gratifying for the white female subject in knowing that the garb of the foreign body can be worn but then at any moment removed as they return to the supremacy of whiteness. It is a comfort to know that even as one “play[s]

around”⁵² in the body of the dark Other, “‘white skin’ awaits underneath.”⁵³ How might these same pleasures of disrobing not appear as available to the re-born, integrated subject? In what ways might the unmournability of Blackness continue to haunt the ex-Muslim who cannot cast-off the skin even as they enter into the white national body? Kalah and Walter’s assimilating acts, in varying degrees, dissipate their Blackness and proffer a means of entering into recognizable existence. What we must ask, however, is whether their mournability sticks to their bodies outside the immediacy of articulating their narratives of assimilation. Thinking specifically of either woman’s movements through the public spaces of the Canadian or Swedish everyday, is it not unreasonable to presume that their dark bodies would first be read as Black by the normative white spectator? Do these women then continually reenter into the terror of Blackness until the story of their national re-birth or, evidence of an aborting contempt can again be recited?

In her compelling text *Ghostly Matters*, Avery F. Gordon explains that haunting and the materialization of the ghost indicate that, “what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.” Gordon further elaborates that haunting is, “an animated state in which ... the over-and-done-with comes alive.”⁵⁴ In tandem with these analyses, we can surmise that in the moments that proceed the integrated subjects’ witnessable acts or pronouncements of assimilation a dangerous and unmournable Blackness repetitively reappears. The Blackness read upon the skin is a specter of that which they must not be. If the Black subject is not countable amongst recognizable life the phantom reemergence of this smothered self would not represent an “over-and-done-with” that has “come alive” but instead, a haunting by the perpetual corpse. Kalah, Walter and others like them would have to exorcize the Black ghost each time it threatens to “interfere” with their hold on an integrated life. Blackness must, therefore, be continuously expelled and replaced by the re-made subject before it can fully draw the converted back into the shadowed regions of the living-dead.

Conclusion

Taking-up the profound analyses coming out of Black feminist thought and Black political theory over the last several decades, this article meditates on whether Black existence can be mournable. Amidst the racist contingencies of white nation-making in Sweden and Canada that both dread and criminalize Black women’s reproduction, I consider how Black Muslim woman might have access to forms of mournability and national belonging that are barred to non-Muslim Black women. Analyzing case studies from Swedish and Canadian media, I propose that Black Muslim women become mournable through the assimilatory act of self-slaughter. By dissolving their Blackness and relinquishing their Muslim identity women can be re-born into the grievability of the white national body. The

threat of unmournable Blackness, however, would continue to haunt women through the surface of the skin.

Notes

1. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 17.
2. Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.), 7–8, 20, 86, 88.
3. *Ibid.*, 86.
4. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London; New York: Verso, 2009).
5. Jan-Therese Mendes, “The Affectivity of White Nation-Making: National Belonging, Human Recognition and the Mournability of Black Muslim Women” (PhD diss., York University, 2019).
6. Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to Present* (Black Point, Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2017); Achille Mbembe, “The Society of Enmity,” *Radical Philosophy* 200 (2016): 23–35.
7. e.g., Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
8. Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström, “Three Phases of Hegemonic Whiteness: Understanding Racial Temporalities in Sweden,” *Social Identities* 20, no. 6 (2014): 423–437; Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).
9. Simone A. Browne, “Everybody’s Got a Little Light Under the Sun,” *Cultural Studies* 26, no. 4 (2012): 542–564; Lena Sawyer and Ylva Habel, “Refracting African and Black diaspora through the Nordic Region,” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 7, no. 1 (2014): 1–6; Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2003).
10. Katherine McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” *Small Axe* 42 (2013): 7.
11. Delores V. Mullings, Anthony Morgan, and Heather Kere Quelleng, “Canada the Great White North where Anti-Black Racism Thrives: Kicking Down the Doors and Exposing the Realities,” *Phylon* 53, no. 1 (2016): 27; Monica Miller, “Figuring Blackness in a Place Without Race: Sweden, Recently,” *ELH* 83 (2016): 389.
12. e.g., Simone A. Browne, “Of ‘Passport Babies’ and ‘Border Control’: The Case of Mavis Baker v. Minister of Citizenship and Immigration,” *Atlantis* 26, no. 2 (2002): 97–108; Maynard, *Policing*, 180; Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017).
13. Sharryn Aiken and Sheena Scott. “Baker v. Canada (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration) and the Rights of Children,” *Journal of Law and Social Policy* 15, (2000).
14. *Ibid.*, 217–8.
15. Jennifer Bailey Woodard and Teresa Mastin. “Black Womanhood: ‘Essence’ and its Treatment of Stereotypical Images of Black Women,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005): 273.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Jenny Burman, “Deportable or Admissible? Black Women and the Space of ‘Removal,’” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2007), 186.
18. Charmaine A. Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 19.
19. Cynthia Wright. “Nowhere at Home: Gender, Race and the Making of Anti-Immigrant Discourse in Canada,” *Atlantis* 24, no. 2 (2000): 38–48.

20. Daniel Stoffman, "Dispatch from Dixon," *Toronto Life*, August 1995: 40–4.
21. Wright, "Nowhere at Home," 43, 45.
22. Wright explains that Stoffman's suspicion that public assistance dollars are being used to clandestinely finance violence abroad is congruent with a similarly unsubstantiated and anti-Black racist report compiled by the Canadian immigration department's intelligence unit and leaked to the public in 1993.
23. Karin Elebro, Mattias Rööst, Kontie Moussa, Sara Johnsdotter and Birgitta Essén, "Misclassified Maternal Deaths among East African Immigrants in Sweden," *Reproductive Health Matters* 15, no. 30 (2007):158, 160.
24. Stefan Jonsson, Private Discussion, May 3, 2017; Irene Molina. Private Discussion. August 17, 2018.
25. Elebro et al., "Misclassified Maternal Deaths," 153, 158.
26. Mekonnen Tesfahuney, Private Discussion, June 21, 2017.
27. Claudia Rankine, "On Racial Violence: 'The Condition of Black Life is Mourning,'" *The New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html>.
28. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 15.
29. *Ibid.*, 15, 74, 80.
30. Rankine, "On Racial Violence."
31. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26, (2008): 1–14.
32. Nelson, *Representing the Black Female*, 19, 20, 23–25.
33. *Ibid.*, 30.
34. A heteronormativity hinted through the presence of her wedding ring. "High yellow" refers to a Black person with a light skin tone — A description that persists in the afterlife of slavery and the plantation.
35. Nelson, *Representing the Black Female*, 30.
36. Mendes, "The Affectivity."
37. Miriam Cooke, "Saving Brown Women," *Signs* 28, no.1 (2002): 468–70; Yasmin Jiwani, "Helpless Maidens and Chivalrous Knights: Afghan Women in the Canadian Press," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2009): 728–744.
38. i.e., considering that un-veiling continually appears as an assimilatory prerequisite.
39. Ify Chiwetelu and Trevor Dineen, "Meet the Somali mom of 5 who just started doing stand-up," *CBC Radio*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/nowornever/fearlessly-funny-women-taking-the-stage-right-now-1.4499150/meet-the-somali-mom-of-5-who-just-started-doing-stand-up-1.4500713>.
40. Jiwani, "Helpless Maidens"; Jasmin Zine, *Islam in the Hinterlands: Muslim Cultural Politics in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012).
41. Dale Hurd, "Ex-Muslim: Koran Revealed a Religion I Did Not Like," *CBN NEWS: The Christian Perspective*, January 2, 2016, <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2015/april/ex-muslim-koran-revealed-a-religion-i-did-not-like>.
42. Natalia Osten-Sacken, "'Everyone Was Afraid to Be Branded as a Racist' Interview with Mona Walter". Gatestone Institute: International Policy Council, April 23, 2018, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/12065/mona-walter-interview>.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. Bob Taylor, "Mona Walter's journey from Muslim to practicing atheist to Christian," *CDN: Communities Digital News*, May 11, 2015, <https://www.commdiginews.com/featured/mona-walter-journey-from-muslim-to-practicing-atheist-to-christian-41329/>
47. Mattias Gardell, Private Discussion, August 31, 2018.
48. Mbembe, "The Society of Enmity."

49. Ibid., 27.
50. Osten-Sacken, “Everyone Was Afraid.”
51. McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 7.
52. Dionne Brand 38, in Christina Sharpe. *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 122.
53. Mary Ann Doana, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 528.
54. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Lena Sawyer and Mara Lee Gerden for their enthusiasm and reflections

About the Author

Jan-Therese Mendes is a PhD candidate in the Graduate Program of Social and Political Thought at York University, Canada.